

The realistic approach to geographical names in Canada

G. Keith Fraser

Volume 10, numéro 20, 1966

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/020627ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/020627ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Fraser, G. K. (1966). The realistic approach to geographical names in Canada. *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 10(20), 235–239.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/020627ar>

THE REALISTIC APPROACH TO GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN CANADA

by

J. Keith FRASER

Toponymy Division, Geographical Branch, Ottawa

Geographical names, or toponyms, have been used by historical geographers in studying the pattern of settlement and cultural development of a country or region. They provide a record of past and present environment, both human and physical. This paper, however, deals with the rational standardization of toponyms as a necessary exercise to establish correct identification, eliminate duplication and ensure propriety as well as to reflect the historical development of the nation. In particular, it concerns the continual problem of adopting new names or endorsing name changes, especially the names of natural features as distinct from place names that are established by legislation of one kind or another.

The fundamental purpose of a toponym is to distinguish a particular geographical feature or group of features so that it may be recognized and identified without ambiguity or confusion. Identification is especially essential today to facilitate the communication of ideas because of the accelerated progress in detailed mapping, increased mobility and the extensive references to geographical names in scientific and popular literature and the daily press.

Toponyms are not static, unalterable appellations, despite any justifiable attempt towards stabilization. They are valid and useful only to the degree to which their users recognize and use them. If public practice indicates that a name other than the officially approved one has become accepted and used, the realistic approach dictates that it should be changed in the official records and this action publicized. Confusion may range from local annoyance to actual disaster in certain situations if one name is officially applied to a feature known otherwise to those closely associated with it. Thus the principles of nomenclature¹ are deliberately phrased as guides, not as strict directives to be rigidly observed. They should be considered as expressions of the philosophy of geographical nomenclature, a distillation of the sixty years of practical experience of the predecessors of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names² and the provincial boards charged with the responsibility over names.

¹ CANADIAN PERMANENT COMMITTEE ON GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES. *Principles and Procedures*, Geog. Branch, Dept. Mines and Tech. Surv., Ottawa, 6 p., 1963. Copies are available on request.

² The Geographic Board of Canada, established in 1897, evolved over the next sixty years into a federal-provincial committee responsible for dealing with all questions of geographical nomenclature concerning Canada. Its successor, the Canadian Board on Geographical Names, was created in 1948 and reorganized in 1961 as the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. This committee is composed of representatives of federal agencies concerned

They are flexible enough to take special circumstances into account, yet worded strongly enough to leave no doubt as to their intent.

Toponyms may be altered or changed completely to accommodate changing conditions. They may be rescinded by legislation, e.g., incorporation of the feature within a larger entity or a change in political status. Nevertheless the old name is not expunged forever for it lives on in the minds of those who knew and used it, as well as on old maps, in official documents and in the general literature. The name Ungava, a district in the Northwest Territories from 1897 to 1912, vanished from the maps when the jurisdiction of the Province of Quebec was extended over what is now the Territory of New Québec, though it is perpetuated, of course, in the name Ungava Bay. Although the name was never officially recognized for the great peninsula between Hudson and Ungava bays, many still refer to this general region by the historical name Ungava. The Township of Trafalgar near Toronto became part of the Town of Oakville in 1962, and so will not appear on future maps, but the name endures in census records and other documents and therefore continues to be of use to those investigating land titles or changes in population and land use.

The proposal, dormant but still alive, to reorganize the Northwest Territories into two territories, Mackenzie and Nunassiat, would mean the elimination of the traditional names Keewatin, Franklin and Northwest Territories. Nunassiat Territory would embrace all of the District of Keewatin, most of Franklin and part of Mackenzie. Mackenzie Territory would take in the remainder of the District of Mackenzie as well as Victoria and Banks islands in the present District of Franklin. It would no longer be proper to refer to the Northwest Territories as a political entity. Whatever administrative or political advantages are claimed by the proponents of this change, the unfortunate editors of scientific journals or reference works would inherit cumbersome editorial problems. Changing the names of major political units even fifty years ago was not particularly upsetting. At that time, little was known and less written about Canada's northland, so that a change in boundaries or title of political entities did not greatly hamper scientific investigation or administration, nor proved particularly embarrassing to the publishers of encyclopedias.

In a recent article,³ objections were raised concerning the unsuitability of many generic terms in the toponymy of Arctic Canada, especially the indiscriminate use of inlet, bay, sound, channel, strait and gulf. As far as terminological accuracy is concerned, these objections are well taken. The early explorers named liberally and, in their choice of generic, not too wisely, often baptizing a feature before they knew its nature or extent. Nevertheless, such misnomers as Davis Strait, Prince Regent Inlet and Exeter Sound are part of Canadian history, linked irrevocably with the pattern of exploration of the

with nomenclature and a representative appointed by each of the provincial governments. The Toponymy Division of the Geographical Branch acts as the research and recording staff, the Division Chief being the Executive Secretary of the Permanent Committee.

³ DIONNE, J.-C., Pour un emploi rationnel des termes géographiques appliqués aux littoraux de l'Arctique canadien, *The Canadian Geographer*, Vol. VII, No. 3, 1963, 116-130.

Northwest Passage. Any attempt to alter them for the sake of definitive accuracy is confronted with this historical background reflected in successive maps, charts and reports. That Prince Regent Inlet, thus named in 1819, is more properly a strait connecting Lancaster Sound with the Gulf of Boothia is scarcely sufficient reason to disregard 150 years of custom and change it to satisfy the modern concept of the term. This is an example of what has been called the « momentum » of an established name — if printed often enough, it becomes habitual and is in the end accepted.⁴ The Permanent Committee recently agreed that « satisfactory and acceptable names of long establishment, especially those of national importance or wide public usage, should not be altered or replaced for any reason.» The difficulty in changing well-established but unsuitable names makes it imperative that control be exercised over any current unregulated use of unofficial names, which may, like the historical ones, become perpetuated through their « momentum.»

Although identification should be recognized as the prime reason for the official application of a name, it may originate from other motives, any of which should always be subordinate to the main purpose. The secondary motive most frequently brought to the attention of the general public is the commemoration of a person, an event or a particular group or organization. The most recent examples in Canada are the application of the name Mount Kennedy to a peak in the Yukon and the name Mount Louis St-Laurent to a peak in the Premier Range in British Columbia. In each case, there was no urgent, practical need to identify these features, although glaciologists in the first case and alpinists in the second will find it useful to be able to refer to these features by officially recognized names. The main purposes, however, was to honour these men for outstanding public service; in so doing, previously unnamed features were selected.

Since 1945, thousands of features in Canada have been named for Canadian servicemen who died in the service of their country during World War II. In these cases, a need for identification was the prime consideration, and where investigation disclosed that the proposed feature already had a locally known name, this was adopted rather than that of a casualty. In more remote areas, however, few local names existed and so throughout the northern parts of the provinces and in the territories, lakes and rivers and hills commemorate forever Canada's fallen soldiers, sailors and airmen. The casualty lists provided a rich source to be drawn upon as the need arose, especially as the mapping of Canada's unsettled lands took place at larger scales and in more detail.

A corollary to the mapping program was that as maps of more and more remote areas were produced, the federal mapping agencies were unable to select suitable sheet titles for some maps. The policy is that a sheet title should be the name of a feature which appears in its entirety within the map-area. Numerous areas were mapped which had no named features whatsoever, or else the only named feature crossed the area or lay only partly within it. In such

⁴ DEBENHAM, F., Place-names in the polar regions, *Polar Record*, Vol. 3, No. 24, 1942, 541-552.

cases, the mapping agency requested that a name be produced to serve as a title. After investigation, if no locally used name was ascertained, a casualty name was selected and applied to a feature within the map-area, serving also as the sheet title. This procedure comes close to what has been termed « forced naming », where a name which has no local historical significance is adopted without a current need for identification.

In considering a new name, defined as a name which had never been officially adopted, a set of twelve guiding principles⁵ of nomenclature are used, against which the propriety of the toponym is evaluated. Accepted after careful consideration by all members of the Permanent Committee in 1963, these principles concern statutory names and those used by railways and resource development companies, public usage, uniformity and duplication, the delicate problem of personal names, the use of French or English forms of a name, the orthography of native names, the form and character of names, generic terms, the use of foreign names in Canadian publications, and the importance of information on origins.

New names come to the attention of the Toponymy Division in various ways. Many come to light from specialized maps, provincial gazettes, the daily press, scientific publications or explorers' journals and old reports. The Post Office Department and the railway companies seek the advice and approval of the Permanent Committee when establishing new offices or stations. Researchers, especially in northern Canada, require names to identify unnamed features in their reports. Provincial members of the Permanent Committee forward proposals originating from resource studies, or occasionally to commemorate worthy pioneers. The mapping and charting organizations collect new names or name changes in the course of their field surveys. Investigation resulting from inquiries concerning the location of named features or the origin of names often results in the discovery of unrecorded local names. Numerous new names and name changes have been disclosed by field surveys sponsored by the Toponymy Division and, in Québec, by La Commission de géographie de Québec, conducted expressly to determine the most correct and appropriate toponymy of a region.

In considering a new name, efforts are made to ascertain if a local toponym already exists for the feature. The correspondence technique is used by necessity rather than by choice, as it does not always elicit the most satisfactory answers from local residents. Principle 3, Names in Public Use, reads as follows :

« First consideration should be given to names with well-established public use. Unless there are good reasons to the contrary, this principle should prevail when it conflicts with any of the following principles. Local usage should be the prime consideration in settled areas, whereas historical significance should be emphasized in unpopulated areas. »

It is only in exceptional circumstances that a name other than that in local use should be approved, e.g., a name obviously in poor taste, duplicated locally, or

⁵ *Principles and Procedures, op. cit.*

recognizably resulting from ownership of land. In such cases, efforts are made to convince the local residents that an alternate name would be more acceptable and advantageous.

Obviously it is preferable to use the same name for the municipality, post office and railway station. This is an ideal situation, however, and is governed by the requirements of the postal and railways authorities who must avoid misdirection of mail, passengers or freight. Because of this, it happens that the names of the post office or station may be quite different from the name of the settlement it serves. For example, in Alberta, the name of the post office at Jefferson is Owendale, while Brazeau is the railway station designation at Nord-egg. The official names of the town, post office and railway station in Québec are spelled Temiscaming, while the county and lake, as well as a point of land, are spelled Témiscamingue. In Ontario, the spelling Timiskaming is approved for the town, lake and district. Because of contention over the origin of the name Annore Creek in British Columbia, the nearby locality and former post office carry the name Anmore. These are undesirable practices which are discouraged but not always resolved.

Duplication of common toponyms has always been an exasperating problem, especially trite, unimaginative names such as Burnt Island, Long Point or Black Creek. Such common, overworked names, many of which are descriptives, are remarkably difficult to prevent or replace. There are 27 officially recognized Mud Lakes in the *Gazetteer* of Ontario; another 78 are listed by cross reference to the official names, indicating sometime usage of the name Mud Lake. The general policy is to attempt to restrict duplication of names of minor features within smaller municipal units such as parishes or townships. In the case of major features, they should not be duplicated within a province. This is often a subjective decision dependent partly on the prevalence of public usage and exceptions may be approved where it is considered that no confusion will result.

These three principles, public usage, uniformity and prevention of duplication, are the major tenets which govern the practical approach to geographical nomenclature. The basic aims of toponymic standardization are clarity and propriety. Recognition of these principles and objectives by all concerned with geographical names in Canada, whether public officials or private citizens, will assist and preserve the conscientious rendering of decisions by the Permanent Committee.